



Volume 4: Forging an Empire: Bismarckian Germany, 1866-1890

Imperial and Free Conservative Party, Founding Manifesto (October 27, 1867)

Although dissention was evident in conservative ranks as early as July 1866, after the North German Confederation was established in 1867 a small group split from the main body of Conservatives to form the Imperial and Free Conservative Party. In Prussia the new grouping took the name Free Conservative Party, which is how most Germans knew it; but the Imperial Party label was used nationally to signal the party's willingness to embrace the new German empire. Probably drafted by Karl Ludwig Aegidi (1825-1901), the party's founding manifesto became its *de facto* program. It expresses typical conservative support for strong government and the monarchy; it also asserts a commitment to the constitution and self-government. The last lines of the manifesto indicate the party's sensitivity toward the charge that it will toe the government line through thick and thin. Not without justification it was known as the "party of ambassadors and ministers," as a quintessential "middle party," as the "Bismarckian party sans phrase." Thus the party profited just as much from Bismarck's support in the anti-Socialist Reichstag campaign of 1878, when it won 57 seats with about 14% of the popular vote, as it suffered from the anti-Bismarck backlash in 1890, when it sank to 20 Reichstag seats and 7% of the vote.

At the close of the Reichstag and in view of a new legislative period in the [Prussian] *Landtag*, the undersigned Prussian members of the Free Conservative Party feel compelled to announce the political course they represent in clear words, and [to describe] the way they have advanced, and will continue to advance, this course in their parliamentary work. Above all, we welcome the memorable moment when the old and new Prussia will seal its united statehood in a common representative body of the people. We have come together in the Reichstag as countrymen, and it shall thus be the *national* interest that unites us in the most heartfelt way. We will have to prove to the new provinces that Prussian and German are one and the same, and that Germany wins that which Prussia acquires. An un-German attitude is alien to us.

We do not fail to recognize the legitimacy of the party system, but we resolutely reject its excesses and exaggerations. We approve of neither the subjugation of men with strength of character to the dogmatism of one political school, nor the subjection of patriotic interests to the special interests of partisan parties. We do not seek to reach an agreement on comprehensive theories but rather on practical questions of current interest. We always value the Fatherland above the party; we value the national interest above all else.

There is a deeper purpose to this. We regard the history of the Prussian state as the prehistory of the new Germany. The great task that reached its progressive resolution in the creation of the Prussian state, the Customs Union [*Zollverein*], and the North German Confederation is now nearing fulfillment and completion – not only through the inevitable unification with the German

south but also through the internal organization of the new *German state*, towards which the first meaningful steps have been taken in this session of the Reichstag. By offering our support, in every way we can, for the national policies of the Federal Chancellor, who pursues the same goals, we, as independent men true to our principles, are putting into practice an essentially conservative idea: we are carefully cultivating and fostering the existing healthy elements that are capable of development, but we are neither breaking with history nor trying to reshape living reality according to some doctrine. The North German Confederation, arising from the Customs Union and about to expand into the “German Empire,” appears to us to be a *German* extension of the Prussian monarchy.

Also adhering to the true conservative spirit, we frankly appreciate this monarchy joining the circle of constitutional states. Absolutism has a glorious history in Prussia. Nowhere else in the entire world has this system of governance left a more indelible monument than in this state: the accomplishment of absolute monarchical power. *But the time of absolutism is past.* Today, it would destroy what it once brought into existence with creative force. Our people, like all civilized nations of this age, do not just need a rightful share in the determination of their destiny for their own satisfaction; the monarchy itself requires the cooperation of the people in order to fulfill its lofty mission. Only the crown of a free nation is due our monarch; his throne rests most securely on the will of free men.

We honor the state constitution as a source of strength for the monarchy, as an unfolding of popular customs and traditions, as the guarantor of the freedom of the church, of the equality of confessions, of the separation of political rights from religious faith. We reject “pseudo-constitutionalism” as a disparagement and a moral corruption of public life. We also fight the antiquated doctrine of separation of powers, which continues to find its adherents; we counter that notion confidently with the principle of the communal exercise of unified state authority.

The party we belong to is committed to the fundamental state law. In accordance with such a Free Conservative stance, we demand the consolidation of the constitution. This consolidation does not reach its apotheosis insofar as the relationship between government and parliament is arranged in a constitutional and dignified way, insofar as the rule of the law is strengthened at the top of the central state authority, or insofar as the arbitrariness of civil servants is eliminated; it does so only once the basic foundation of national life is imbued with the spirit of liberty. No electoral law can guarantee the existence of true liberty. From our perspective, the nature and the benefits of that liberty are not founded on allowing as many people as possible to be called upon to join in governing the state. Instead, they derive from the fact that everywhere a sphere of independent will and action, based on law and justice, makes itself felt vis-à-vis a strong government. We seek and find the conclusion of liberal development in the self-administration of all the people's organizations and social categories.

Thus, we are striving to secure independence for our people: in the house and home, in industry and the trades, among workers and employers, in the arts and sciences, in the city and countryside, in the district and province. Just as our federal states explicitly preserve their peculiarities in the framework of the North German Confederation, so too would we like to see all living parts within that state move in free self-determination – irrespective of the unity and supreme supervision of the state. The objective of our efforts requires a thorough reform of the central principles of administration.

Apart from integrating the Prussian legal system into the whole structure of the North German Confederation, our *Landtag* will have no more important task in the next few years than

establishing this liberty in all realms of life. Therefore, in all this we are confidently counting on the cooperation of all representatives of the new and old provinces.

With the utmost commitment, we are dedicated to improving the material interests of our people in matters such as taxation, commerce and transportation, agriculture, the significant relationship between capital and labor – but no less in matters of serious concern for the intellectual values of the nation: the elementary school system, institutes of scholarship, universities, and academies.

In manful independence, we intend to stand by the federal authority and the state government whenever their policies correspond with our principles, and particularly when they designate the national interest as the supreme priority. With true loyalty to king and Fatherland we will, however, resolutely uphold our free conservative principles in those instances when these policies diverge from them.

Blind instruments are not useful supports for the government; only that which has firm support itself is able to provide support in turn.

Source: Ludolf Parisius, *Deutschlands politische Parteien und das Ministerium Bismarck* [*Germany's Political Parties and Bismarck's Ministry*]. Berlin, 1878, pp. 113-15.

Original German text reprinted in Felix Salomon, ed., *Die deutschen Parteiprogramme* [*German Party Programs*], Issue 1, *Vom Erwachen des politischen Lebens in Deutschland bis zur Reichsgründung 1871* [*From the Awakening of Political Life in Germany to the Founding of the Reich in 1871*], ed. Wilhelm Mommsen and Günther Franz, 4th ed. Leipzig and Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1932, pp. 143-45.

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